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ABSTRACT

In the late 20th century, Australia's diverse population and international commitments require its constituents to use plain English. Unfortunately, its language is eroding as fast as its soil. On the one hand, much academic jargon excludes even well-educated readers; on the other, many teachers do not believe in teaching grammar or standard English. Consequently, Australia's economy loses $13 million a year and employers complain that graduates have poor communication skills. The recent renewal of interest in grammar may not help because the notion of "correct" English is being replaced with "standard" English, one dialect among many. Of help in evaluating language written today are three indices: Gunning's Fog index, which measures the number of difficult words per sentence; Halliday's lexical density, which measures the number of lexical items per clause; and Flesch Reading Ease, which measures the number of words per sentence and syllables per 100 words. Such indices show us the relative difficulty of language written by scholars and students today compared with that of clean stylists such as Virginia Woolf and George Orwell. Contributing to these stylistic disparities is the agnosticism of resource books like Peter Knapp's "Literacy and Learning Programs," which views grammar as a descriptive rather than a prescriptive program. Knapp and other educators fail to encourage certain types of expression, (i.e., active verbs, active voice) over others. They consider no forms of expression better than others. (TB)

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Grunts or Jargon: Poor Communication in Educational Writing

Charlotte Clutterbuck

I

In the late twentieth century, Australia's diverse population and international commitments require us to use plain English. Unfortunately, our language is eroding as fast as our soil. On the one hand, much academic jargon excludes even well educated readers.[1] On the other, many teachers don't believe in teaching grammar. Consequently, many university students know plenty of jargon, but can't tell a noun from a verb,[2] and employers complain that graduates' poor communication skills are bad for business.[3]

The recent renewal of interest in grammar may not help, because the notion of 'correct' English is replaced with 'Standard' English, one dialect among many.[4] The new grammarians often use jargon and wordy language, jeering at 'Latinate grammar', and replacing Latin terms like *classify* and *co-ordinate* with Greek ones like *taxonomise* and *parataxis* - not to mention *inferred cataphoric deictic modifiers*.

I'll use three measures of difficulty to analyse examples of writing I think students should and shouldn't emulate. Gunning's Fog Index is based on the percentage of difficult words per sentence: 1-6 is suitable for primary school, 7-12 for secondary, and 13-16 for university. Halliday's lexical density[5] is based on the number of lexical items per clause. Written English usually scores between 3 and 6:[6] the lower the density, the easier to read. Flesch Reading Ease is based on words per sentence and syllables per hundred words: the easiest writing scores 100. Your computer may calculate the Flesch and Fog Index scores when you do a grammar check.

* * *

If we wish to communicate in a multicultural society with many ESL speakers, we should avoid complex sentences, uncommon words, and overuse of the passive voice. But consider this example of academic jargon:

> While it has now become commonplace in Australia to apply post-colonial theories to texts by racially marginalized groups such as Aborigines, these approaches are less widely used in the analysis of women's writing which tends to provoke feminist critiques divorced from rather than inflected by critiques of colonialism. Some theorists have drawn parallels between the condition of women interpellated by the discourses of patriarchy and the marginalization of the indigenous subject in the imperial situation, but, as Bill Ashcroft points out, 'the amount of genuine cross-fertilisation between the two [theoretical approaches] is scant'.[7]

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These sentences are complex, with few verbs, nearly half of them passive. The Fog Index is 27, lexical density 7, and the Reading Ease Zero. While deploring marginalisation,[8] such academics marginalise those who don't know the jargon. Whom are they writing for?

Linguists and literary theorists often use dense jargon. According to M.A.K. Halliday, spoken language is fluid, and prefers the clause, where processes or verbs take place; written language is dense, and favours the noun phrase, where things predominate.[9] Halliday's followers often write densely, turning verbs into nouns - nominalisation. They also turn nouns into verbs like *recontextualize* and *problematize*,[10] or talk of 'Grammaticalizing the ecology.'[11] Take this passage from a socio-linguistics textbook:

> For any member of a social group discursive multiplicity, contestation, and difference is both a description of their history and an account of their present social position at any given moment. The individual's history is composed of the experience of a range of discourses, passing through the intimate relations of the family and its discourses of authority, gender, morality, religion, politics; into school and its discourses of knowledge, science, authority, aesthetics; to work and adulthood. The discursive history of each individual therefore bears the traces of the discourses associated with the social places which that individual has occupied and experienced. These form, like sedimentary layers, the linguistic experience and potential of the speaker. (113 words)[12]

Although this is an undergraduate text, the Fog Index is 19, the Reading Ease 22, and the lexical density 7. Compare a passage from George Orwell:

> A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. The point is that the process is reversible. Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. If one gets rid of these habits, one can think more clearly...[13] (110 words)

Here the Fog Index is 11, Reading Ease 66, and density 3. The first passage is longer, largely because the words are longer. The language is dense with noun phrases and nominalisations such as 'contestation'; there are only eight verbs to Orwell's twenty. Orwell's style is energetic, easy to understand, and therefore more enlightening.

* * *

One of the new grammar resource books is Peter Knapp's *Literacy and Learning Program*.[14] Knapp stresses the need to teach grammar in context, and provides a stimulating analysis of different genres. Unfortunately, however, he sees grammar as a descriptive tool 'rather than as a set of rules for correct sentence construction', arguing that the traditional concern with correctness 'left a legacy of ill-will.'[15]

That ill-will was due to interminable parsing and analysis and unimaginative teachers who stressed 'correctness' at the expense of creativity. The solution is not to abandon 'correct' grammar, but to use it in context to illuminate literature and improve students' writing.[16]

While ideas of correctness need constant updating, rules do provide a guide to socially acceptable norms of language.[17] After the Spock-marked generation, we know that children feel safer with rules. They accept rules in rugby and netball; why not in language? Students can't appreciate the way Patrick White flouts grammatical rules, unless they know there are rules to flout. People with no concept of correct English can't correct their mistakes.[18] Although, as Frances Christie says, teachers should respect the language of children who speak non-standard dialects,[19] these children are the ones who most need training in 'correct' English. If correctness isn't taught, students with educated parents usually learn to write correctly. Those from less educated backgrounds continue to use non-standard English, which may cost them a job. Although Knapp recognises that these children are disadvantaged without mastery of 'standard' English,[20] he fails to see that this means mastery of rules.

Incorrect English distorts meaning. I may smile when students use *viscous cycles* instead of vicious circles, and write about the *Black Plaque of London*, but the joke loses savour when poor language causes industrial accidents costing Australia $13 million a year.[21]

As well as devaluing correctness, and reproducing student errors without comment, Knapp actually encourages jargon and waffle:

> Description enables the categorisation or classification of the almost infinite range of concrete and abstract experiences, observations and interactions into a system of both knowing them and of ordering them for immediate and future reference.[22]

Here there is one verb. The processes *categorise, classify, observe, interact, know, order, and refer,* are all nominalised. This is a very small sample, but the Fog Index is 27, the Reading Ease zero and the lexical density an enormous 17.

Knapp illustrates the difference between spoken and written language by comparing two sentences: *I think people should not use so much packaging,* and, *The use of packaging should be reduced by manufacturers.* The sentence, *Manufacturers should reduce packaging,* would be active, more precise and briefer than either, but Knapp does not suggest it. Instead he says, with apparent approval, that

> the second sentence... is closer to the way economics as a discipline... would present such a proposition... The action verb of the first sentence... has been transformed, in the second sentence, into a noun. This transformation takes a concrete action and makes it an abstract entity.[23]

As Robert Eagleson, author of *Plain English* points out, the active is more personal, lively, and explicit than the passive; and turning verbs into nouns makes writing static, dull, and remote.[24] Plain English increases productivity, reduces costs, and gives consumers better service.[25] Knapp encourages children to do the opposite, to use passives, nominalisations and abstract expressions in their formal writing.

As a final example, look at the way Virginia Woolf can discuss an abstract idea in concrete language:

> Anger was tampering with the integrity of Charlotte Bronte the novelist. She left her story, to which her entire devotion was due, to attend to some personal grievance. She remembered that she had been starved of her proper due of experience – she had been made to stagnate in a parsonage mending stockings when she wanted to wander free over the world. Her imagination swerved from indignation and we feel it swerve. But there were many more influences than anger tugging at her imagination and deflecting it from its path. Ignorance, for instance. The portrait of Rochester is drawn in the dark. We feel the influence of fear in it; just as we constantly feel an acidity which is the result of oppression, a buried suffering smouldering beneath her passion, a rancour which contracts those books, splendid as they are, with a spasm of pain.[26]

Like Orwell, Woolf uses plenty of verbs; the Fog Index is 12, the Reading Ease 61; the lexical density under 3.

Surely we should encourage children to write like Woolf and Orwell – concrete, vigorous writing, with simple words and strong verbs. The new grammar seems unlikely to achieve either this or correctness. And as polysyllabic jargon and overuse of the passive require more space than Plain English, the new grammar could cost Australia time, money, and paper. Unless we teach students to use correct and simple English, highly educated Australians may discourse amongst themselves in jargon, while the less educted communicate in grunts.

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[14] *Op.cit.*

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[20] Knapp, pp.8-9.

[21] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7.4.94.

[22] Knapp, p. 15.

[23] Knapp, p.6.

[24] Eagleson, Robert D. 1990, *Plain English*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, pp33,64.

[25] Eagleson, p.6

[26] *A Room of One's Own*, Hogarth Press, London, 1974,p.110.